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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PMIL](#) [MASS](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR PRESSES DEFMIN FOR GREATER INFORMATION
SHARING; MORJANE CAUTIONS AGAINST OPPOSITION CONTACTS

REF: A. TUNIS 173
[1](#)B. IIR 6 897 0049 08 (DTG 040813Z JUN 08)

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Meeting with Defense Minister Morjane in preparation for the mid-May Joint Military Commission (JMC), the Ambassador underscored the importance of a robust information exchange and closer cooperation. In addition to helping avoid the problems that led to the recent cancellation of the Atlas Drop exercise, better information will allow us to offer training and exercises that are tailored to Tunisian needs. Moreover, we need to better understand Tunisia's security needs to develop and defend appropriate security assistance requests. Morjane pleaded with the Ambassador not to read any negative signals into the GOT's handling of Atlas Drop. With more time, he explained, the answers the US side was looking for would have come from the palace, allowing the exercise to go forward. Morjane informed the Ambassador that the Presidency and the Foreign Ministry had intended to split the Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) the USG is providing under Peacekeeping Assistance funds equally between the Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of Interior; he did not seem surprised by the Ambassador's response that this assistance would be limited to the military. Shifting gears, Morjane, noted the continuing trend of anti-American sentiment in the Arab world, as expressed in its popular media outlets. Presumably speaking on instruction, he warned the Ambassador that contacts with the opposition can be construed as support for them, which ultimately hurts the US cause. He cautioned, "You should not underestimate the message that you're giving to those who have always been on your side." The Ambassador made clear that he has contact with all legal opposition parties but that this should not be interpreted as US support for them. End Summary.

Laying the Groundwork for a Productive JMC

[1](#)2. (C) In his hour-long meeting with Defense Minister Morjane on March 25, the Ambassador sought to lay the groundwork for a productive Joint Military Commission (JMC) in May by noting the status of USG deliberations on the FY09 FMF level, reviewing preliminary USG planning for the JMC, and underscoring the need for better information exchange and closer cooperation. Morjane, who was accompanied by Captain-Major Mohamed Khammassi, who is responsible for bilateral and multilateral relations at the Ministry of National Defense (MND), and Colonel-Major Mohamed Ghorbel, MND Director of Cooperation and International Relations, was receptive. He welcomed the news of DASD Whelan's planned in-country travel on the margins of the JMC, and said the GOT would ensure that she has an informative and enjoyable visit.

Training and Exercises: Better Info Exchange
To Avoid Another Atlas Drop Imbroglio

¶3. (C) Previewing possible JMC agenda items, the Ambassador noted that the US side would want to have an in-depth discussion about training and exercises. Referring to the recent problems in the Atlas Drop exercise, which was canceled as a result of conditions imposed by the GOT that were not acceptable to the US military, the Ambassador explained that the USG will seek clear GOT guidance on what it wants out of such exercises. The United States would be prepared to tailor exercises according to Tunisian needs and desires, he said. For example, given the Ministry of National Defense's focus on civilian works, perhaps we could offer a program with the Army Corps of Engineers.

¶4. (C) Morjane pleaded with the Ambassador not to read anything negative into Tunisia's late response to US requests with respect to Atlas Drop. "It was a question of timing for us," he said, "nothing more." He acknowledged missing the US side's suspense date for a response, and he conceded the USG's right to impose a deadline for its internal decisionmaking. He noted, however, that such deadlines do not work in Tunisia. "You know how our system is," he said, apparently referring to the GOT's renowned capacity for bureaucratic inertia. He made clear that he had sent the US questions "up," presumably to the palace, for approval; by the time the approval came back "down," however, it was too late. The Ambassador noted that it was unfortunate that so

much time and so many resources had gone into an exercise that never materialized. (Note: In a one-on-one pull aside after the meeting, the Ambassador spoke even more frankly to Morjane about US frustration over the cancellation of Atlas Drop. Morjane asked, again, that the Ambassador understand the MND's "special status", clearly referring to the need to refer even minor questions to Carthage for decision. End Note.)

Better Info Also Helps
Security Cooperation

¶5. (C) The Ambassador offered that DASD Whelan would be prepared to give a briefing to GOT counterparts on the various pots of money the USG can tap to provide security assistance to Tunisia. He explained these moneys are often apportioned in a competitive process in which multiple Embassies put forward proposals to meet the security needs of their host country governments. The better our understanding of the Tunisian military's needs, he continued, the better our ability to defend our assistance requests.

UAVs Provided Under PKO:
No-go on Palace/MFA Intent to Give Half to MOI

¶6. (C) Morjane broached the subject of the US \$4.1 million worth of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) about which then-Secretary Rice informed President Ben Ali during her September, 2008, visit to Tunisia. (Note: This assistance is being provided under Peacekeeping Operations (PKO) account funds. End Note.) Morjane said that following Rice's announcement, the Presidency and the Foreign Ministry, without consulting the MND, had decided to split the PKO assistance equally between the Ministry of National Defense and the Ministry of Interior. The Ambassador explained that the assistance being provided under the PKO account was for the military only and could not be shared with the MOI. He said that if the MOI had particular needs, we would be happy to consider them. Morjane did not seem surprised that the assistance would be limited to the military; indeed, he

seemed pleased. He asked that the Ambassador formally convey this message to the Foreign Ministry. (Note: The Ambassador did so in a March 26 meeting with MFA Chief of Staff Mahmoud Khemiri and Special Assistant to the Foreign Minister Mehrez Ben Rhouma. He also undertook to convey this position via diplomatic note. See Ref A.)

Opposition Contacts Not Welcome

¶17. (C) Midway through the meeting, Morjane became philosophical. He said he had been following with interest and admiration the new direction President Obama is taking vis-a-vis the Middle East. He characterized the President's decisions as "more realistic" and "respectful." He contrasted this with the resurgence of anti-American sentiment and other "backwards thinking" has been taking place in popular Arabic media outlets over the past couple of years. He pointed out that such popular sentiment poses difficulties for the GOT, which is known for its tolerance, openness, and modernity. Illustrating the point, he referred to the June 2008 NATO ship visit to Bizerte, which was met with a small protest against the Iraq war. (Note: The protest was organized by the independent opposition Progressive Democratic Party, and was covered in al-Mowqif, the party's newspaper. See Ref B.) "You may think that a NATO ship visit is no big deal," he said, clearly implying that the opposite was true.

¶18. (C) Morjane went on to chastise the Ambassador for "supporting" these very people. "You should think about who your friends are," he continued, "and you should not underestimate the message that you're giving to those who have always been on your side." We should be helping one another, he concluded. The Ambassador said he was well aware of the sensitivities involved with cooperating with the United States, and he said that we are prepared to do our part to help mitigate difficulties. He also clarified that he has contact with representatives of all legal political parties in Tunisia. He emphasized that such contacts do not constitute "support." Moreover, he said, he always gives Tunisia credit for its accomplishments, whether talking to GOT or ruling party officials, or representatives of the opposition. Even so, Morjane insisted, opposition figures take advantage of these contacts, which they seek to construe as US support.

Comment

¶19. (C) Although Morjane tried to couch his comments about dealing with the opposition as off-the-cuff, we believe he was speaking on instruction. And though he did not mention the opposition Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) by name, he was clearly referring to it, and by extension, its founder and would-be presidential candidate Nejib Chebbi, against whom Ben Ali harbors an intense animus. This is not the first time that the Ambassador has received such a message. Other highly placed interlocutors, such as appointed Senator Roger Bismuth, have sought to steer the Ambassador away from contacts with Chebbi, also likely at the behest of senior RCD officials. It is probable that the Palace chose Morjane to convey the message this time, because Morjane is seen as someone who can communicate effectively with US counterparts. Of course, the Embassy will continue to have contacts with the PDP and other legal opposition parties, in addition to the ruling party, but we will seek a lower profile in the coming weeks in response to this apparent message.

¶10. (C) On a separate note, we were struck by Morjane's admission that the permissions the US side had been seeking for the Atlas Drop exercise had to go "up" to the Palace for approval. This should have been a purely technical, military call. It is no surprise things move so slowly in this country. End Comment.

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